

The Shame In Dallas . . .

By Harvey Aronson

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(Aronson, then a reporter, arrived in Dallas Nov. 22, 1963, only hours after President John F. Kennedy was shot.)

In the hours after President Kennedy was assassinated, shame hushed the streets of Dallas. "Dallas is a city it's hard to put a label on," a man told me. "But I guess you can now."

In the instant it took to pull the trigger of a mail order rifle, the city people called "Big D" became the place where John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, was assassinated. And shame followed shock.

It was not simply that a president had been murdered but that this particular president had been murdered. He was young and vital and he made us think that Camelot had come to the nation's capital. He was, perhaps, our most eloquent president since Abraham Lincoln. He spoke of a New Frontier that he described as "a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils . . . a frontier of unfulfilled hopes . . ." He had barely begun to explore that frontier when he was killed. And in the moment that he died, so did many of our hopes. Or at least the promise of those hopes. After that, something in us hardened. We became inured to violence.

I got to Dallas about four hours after the shooting and the experiences that followed endure in my mind as gray snapshots whose edges are blurred by time and emotion. In one of the snapshots, police bring the accused assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, into a room full of reporters. He is only a few feet away, a scrawny, sullen man with a sour and arrogant expression. His face is bruised. The belief is that police have beaten him and that bothers me. And yet — even though he has yet to be proven guilty — I want to pummel him, too.

That's how it was in Dallas, the city where Camelot died. Shock and anger and confusion and shame. It was a Friday night, when the streets should have been bustling. But it could have been a lonely Sunday afternoon — the stores had closed soon after people found out that the president had been assassinated as he rode through the city in a motorcade.

'I Had Just Seen Him'

The shame was everywhere. In lonely footfalls on Main Street, in a funeral wreath on the locked door of a country music club. It showed itself in a Christmas tree whose ornaments gleamed in an unlighted shop window and in a small sign on the door of the famous Neiman-Marcus department store. The black letters read, "Closed in Memory of John F. Kennedy."

The only place where traffic was anywhere near busy was near the corner of Elm and Houston, the neighborhood where it happened. People gathered on the sidewalk in front of the Texas School Book Depository — the building from which he was shot. It was as if they were taking part in a public confessional. An insurance clerk huddled in her overcoat staring upwards. "It was my lunch hour," she said. "I saw him in the parade, and then just a few minutes later, I heard the sirens and everyone was yelling. I mean I had just seen him and he looked so wonderful."

Nowadays, one of my jobs is to help reporters with their writing. I tell them that they should try not to get emotionally involved in their stories — they should try to stay on the outside. But I know that sometimes they can't. I found that out in Dallas 30 years ago. I loved John Kennedy and I believed in his promise. I have never felt that way about a president since. I never got to journey in the New Frontier. And that day in Dallas, I walked the city streets with tears streaming down my face.

That day in Dallas, I was ashamed, too.

The Next Student Page Appears Tuesday

You can hear radio reports from the scene of the assassination in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, by using a Touch-Tone phone to dial 842-5484, and entering category 3004.

FAMILY TALK - DO THIS TOGETHER

Where Were You When You Heard JFK Was Shot?

Students, take a moment to ask this question of older members in your family or a neighbor and record their answers here to send to us.

Your older family member's reminiscence:

AP Photo
John and Jackie Kennedy

Now, take a moment to tell us your impressions of the late president based on what you've learned in school or in books or from the media. What kind of president do you think he was and why?

Your older family member's name / Town:

Your name:

School / Town:

THE LAST DAY IN JOHN KENNEDY'S LIFE

Excerpts from the new book, "President Kennedy: Profile of Power" (Simon & Schuster), by Richard Reeves:

On Friday morning, November 22, Kennedy was awakened by a tapping on the door of the master bedroom by his valet George Thomas. "It's raining, Mr. President," Thomas said. Looking out the window, Kennedy was surprised by the size of the crowd already gathering eight stories below. He crossed over to his wife's room to get a better look. "Isn't it terrific?" he asked her. He had been using the word again and again. At each stop, the crowd was larger and more enthusiastic than expected. But the headline on the front page of the Dallas Morning News was not so terrific: "PRESIDENT'S VISIT SEEN WIDENING STATE DEMOCRATIC SPLIT."

He called Kenny O'Donnell and told him his job that day was to make sure that Vice President Lyndon Johnson and Senator Ralph Yarborough, political adversaries for decades, rode in the same car. "I don't care if you have to throw Yarborough into the car with Lyndon to get him in there," Kennedy wanted to look like the leader of a unified Democratic Party, particularly in Texas where he already had enough troubles. The Belvedere Poll showed that his approval rate in the state was just 50 percent . . . The Morning News was also carrying a full-page advertisement paid

for by H. L. Hunt and other right-wing businessmen, asking the president twelve loaded questions, including: "Why did you host, salute and entertain Tito — Moscow's Trojan Horse . . .?" and "Why has the Foreign Policy of the United States degenerated to the point that the CIA is arranging coups and having staunch Anti-Communist Allies of the U.S. bloodily exterminated?"

"We're heading into nut country today," Kennedy said when he saw the ad. But the reception certainly seemed friendly when he looked out the window again at the platform from which he would be speaking in a few minutes. "Look at that platform," he said to O'Donnell. "With all these buildings around it, the Secret Service couldn't stop someone who really wanted to get you."

The White House transcripts of what the president said each day continued with this note:

"After the breakfast at the Texas Hotel in Fort Worth [he] flew to Love Field . . . and then entered an open car. The motorcade traveled down a 10-mile route through downtown Dallas on its way to the Trade Mart, where the president planned to speak at a luncheon. At approximately 12:30 p.m. Central time, he was struck by two bullets fired by an assassin.

"The president was declared dead at 1 p.m. at the Parkland Hospital in Dallas."

PRESIDENT KENNEDY

PROFILE OF POWER
RICHARD REEVES